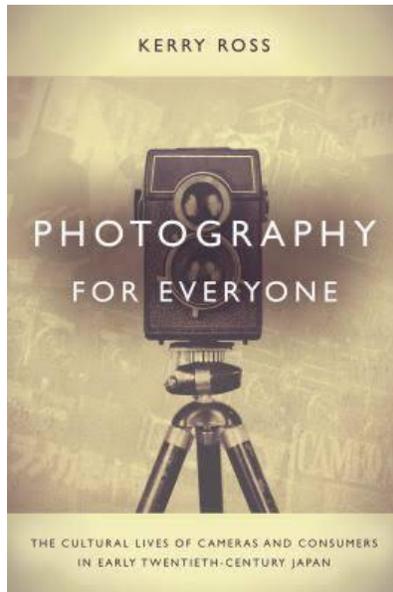


**Kerry Ross, *Photography for Everyone: The Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. xv + 234 pp. ISBN 978-0-8047-9564-7**



While most of the scholarship on the history of modernist photography in Japan deals with the avant-garde, the material in the archives is largely directed toward amateur photographers according to Kerry Ross, Assistant Professor in the Department of History at DePaul University, and author of *Photography for Everyone: The Cultural Lives of Cameras and Consumers in Early Twentieth-Century Japan*. Her book with its 64 illustrations looks at the world of photography in prewar Japan. As the title suggests, the emphasis here is on the hobbyists, the industry that supported the everyday practitioners, the educators/supporters of the field, and the societal environments and practices that developed around photography. Stated another way, the entire picture-making process from start to finish, including buying one's equipment, learning the how-tos, following publications on photography, participating in clubs, contests and exhibitions, and maintaining one's collection, are all part of this volume.

In the preface, the author notes that, “postwar scholars have made modernist photography stand in for nearly all photographic activity of the time. To date, most scholarly work on the subject has focused on the origins and development of a single strand of art photography, with particular attention to the creative efforts of a select few individual artists and theorists” (p. xiii). Photography as utilitarian and practical, or aesthetic (i.e. divorced from technology) was the great debate, but by sheer numbers the amateurs and hobbyists were the majority. While both camps embraced pictorialism, the contributions of the hobbyists, the greater group and their impact on both consumerism and the development of democratic movements has been largely overshadowed by fine art photography, a situation righted by this book.

More than just a history of the amateur, Ross researches the economic and cultural aspects of her subject. This means recognizing the significant roles played by companies such as Konishi Roku and Asanuma Shokai, and the various publications such as *Asahi Kamera*, in creating the consumer culture that supported the popularization of photography. Kerry calls these two businesses “arbiters of middle class taste” (p. 6). In fact, she begins with George Eastman’s unofficial visit to Japan in 1920, at the invitation of the country’s leading economic advisors. Sales of Kodak products were brisk in Japan, testament to the Japanese people’s devotion to photography. A phenomenon, which slowed during the war years, but has not abated.

Ross’s description of the hobbyist photographer made me realize that I was one of her subjects. Writing this review, reminded me that when I lived in Japan in the late ‘80s, I myself become an amateur photographer.

Influenced by the marketing and availability of used cameras, I bought a Nikon 301 and turned into an avid practitioner and consumer (of photographic processing services), much in the same way the early enthusiasts depicted in Ross' book did. Reading *Photography for Everyone*, one learns more than just about photography.

Five uniquely themed chapters, present the nuances of the world of photography in pre-war Japan. Chapter 1, "A Retail Revolution: Male Shoppers and the Creation of the Modern Shop" looks at an industry dominated by male consumers. By focusing on men and their shopping behaviors, Ross counters the trend in scholarship of associating women with the rise of department stores and consumerism. Because men were the primary buyers of photographic equipment, companies adopted overtly gendered-marketing strategies that are thoroughly explained in this chapter. For example, Konishi Roku became Japan's leading producer and retailer of cameras, equipment and light sensitive materials. Its own brand (sales) headquarters was built in 1916 and tailor-made in-store customer experience protocols were designed. In addition to the "big" stores, there were a plethora of used camera shops and a myriad of advertisements and publications designed to support the industry.

In Chapter 2, "Photography for Everyone: Women, Hobbyists, and Marketing Photography," the very real gender distinction between the hobbyist/amateur photographer, typically a male who produced his own photographs in a darkroom, and the casual photographer, a woman or child who takes photographs but has them printed by a developer, is defined (within society) and as portrayed in literature (journals, magazines, articles and how-to publications) and in marketing material.

The effect of literature on photography (from the mid. 19<sup>th</sup> century) is the subject of Chapter 3 "Instructions for Life: How-to Literature and Hobby Photography." The author not only analyzes this neglected body of work, she elucidates the promise of "mastery of their subject (i.e. chosen pastime)" along with the "appropriate place of photography in their [men's] leisure time and in their home" (p. 69), and the sexism that was prevalent in society. Noteworthy is that "While women appear as mere picture takers in how-to literature, men appear as makers, involved in every step of the process [i.e. outfitting a darkroom and developing film]" (p. 94).

As its title suggests, "Democratizing Leisure: Camera Clubs and the Popularization of Photography," provides a brief history of photography clubs including bylaws, job descriptions, and rules governing membership. In truth, "...camera clubs joined museums, galleries and exhibitions as primary institutional settings for the democratization of the fine arts in modern Japan," and they "provided members the opportunity to participate in democratically run organizations where they could exercise individual rights not granted to most of them in the wider political system" (p. 100). The implications for these findings and others throughout *Photography for Everyone* make this volume critical for cultural, political, and social historians of modern Japan.

A study in this kind of depth would not be complete without a look at what was produced by the artist/practitioners. So, the question "What sort of pictures did hobbyists take and why?" is asked and answered in Chapter 5, "Making Middlebrow Photography: The Aesthetics and Craft of Amateur Photography." The author explains that the mastery of technical skills (bromoil and bromoil transfer, for example) including darkroom mechanics was key. She discusses Fukuhara Shinzō's 1926 article "The Way of Photography" which became the manifesto, or aesthetic rule book, for amateur photographers, and the four approaches to pictorial photography or *geijutsu shashin* in Saito Tazunori's "How to Make Art Photographs" (1932). While Ross notes the "definite, if subtle, shift toward realistic expression" or expressionism in photography from the mid 1930s (p. 132), it is the antagonism, between the hobbyists and the modernist, that is quite fascinating. Hobbyists "rarely chose to work with modernist modes of representation." Rather their preference was a "practical approach to the craft of photography" (p.162). "Modernists carved out their niche, in fact, by attacking the fundamental joys of hobby photography—its growing popularity, its conventional aesthetics and its deep connection to the industry" (p.165). The amateur photographer was part of a sweeping phenomenon which went beyond a pastime. "Darkroom work necessitated producing something on your own and

under your own control—values that how-to writers had extolled for decades and that referenced the idealized lifestyles to which most hobbyists aspired” (p.167).

As one of the first books to address photography as practiced and appreciated by the general population, this study touches on a wealth of topics from consumerism and gender studies to emergent nationalism and the nascent democratization of society. It examines the middle-class hobbyists and their consumer habits, identifies the strategies of the for-profit companies that sold everything needed to make photography a pastime, and finally looks at the movements to popularize photographic art which includes the clubs, subscriptions and monthly exhibitions that inspired the amateur photographer. This volume is so rich that historians in a variety of disciplines (art, culture, and economics, not just Japan and photography), will want to make it part of their libraries.

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*Independent Curator*



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